DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 161 072 CS 204 466

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TITLE Correspondence: A Medium Rediscovered.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (6th, Dallas, Texas, April 7-8, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Communication Skills; *Composition (Literary); Discourse Analysis; *English Instruction; Grade 12; High School Students; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Letters (Correspondence); Secondary Education; Senior High Schools; Student Attitudes; *Student Interests; *Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

Two English teachers, one in North Carolina and one in Missouri, structured a correspondence project for their senior English classes so that 60 students at each school exchanged personal letters once each week during the semester. The students responded to the project with an interest and drive that overshadowed their interest in the normal English class studies. After the teachers examined the students' correspondence, they identified three dimensions of discourse that were applicable to any clause in the letters. These dimensions (subject distance, temporal distance, and level of understanding) offer a three-faceted perspective on correspondence as a medium and yield two conclusions to the study. First, students tend to prefer discourse that concerns a relatively intimate subject distance ("I" and "you" as opposed to "them" and "it"), that treats recent matters, and that establishes the significance of discussed events instead of merely supplying uninterpreted narratives and descriptions. Second, dialogue through the mail seems to be fostered less by wit and observation than by the discernment and reporting of personalized meaning. (Author/RL)

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CORRESPONDENCE: A MEDIUM REDISCOVERED

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"Who writes letters nowadays?" we asked our senior English students in Independence, Missouri and Fayetteville, North Carolina. It was not a compelling question for them. They didn't know or care. After a pause, several admitted they themselves wrote letters to acknowledge gifts. Such correspondence was carried out as an investment (no thank you letter, no more gifts) and as a response to parental threat. Eventually, the students allowed that businessmen, lawyers and compulsive lovers also wrote letters. "Does anybody here write letters regularly? Do any of you maintain a relationship by correspondence?" Two or three fiancé(e)s raised their hands but lowered them quickly. Needless to say, as we began to introduce this correspondence project to our students we found that as far as letter writing was concerned they possessed a singular lack of zeal and understanding.

In outlining the procedures they would be following during the spring semester, therefore, we tried to energize their attitudes. We told them that in exchanging letters each week with a peer who lived about 1,000 miles away they would have a chance to develop a significant, possibly deep relationship in a very unique way. They were offered the following rationale:

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> Such an arrangement affords both a handicap and an opportunity. You will be handicapped because several powerful means of communication will be unavailable; for example, there will be no chance for two correspondents to meet face to face, or to have phone conversations, or to exchange pictures, audio tapes or video tapes. On the other hand, the limitations of writing can be turned to your advantage. Because you cannot exchange visual and auditory cues, you will have the opportunity to make your language work especially hard, especially profoundly for you. Although you are far away from your correspondent, you may get closer to his/her hopes, values, apprehensions, thoughts than if you were actually in his/her presence. You will find that writing to make yourself understood by a new, distant friend will force you to examine your own thoughts and feelings quite rigorously. You may well find that writing can be a powerful means of self-discovery.

They remained dubious, but were willing to give it a try.

The procedures were relatively simple. To begin, Mrs. Pat Wilde's students at William Chrisman High School in Missouri, and Mrs. Mary Wilmers' students at Terry Sanford High School in North Carolina all composed letters of introduction. The students were encouraged to be autobiographical and self descriptive. Describing the first episode that came to mind when they thought of their childhood was suggested as a revealing ploy. The Independence students each prepared a 3x5 card that outlined the type of person with whom they would like to correspond. Their letters and cards were mailed in a packet to Fayetteville, where the students and the teacher matched up correspondents. Then the Fayetteville introductory letters were personally addressed and mailed to Independence, and after a seven-day hiatus there began a weekly exchange of letters that occurred 13 times during the semester. Each Wednesday, class time was provided for writing, but mailing was delayed until Friday to accommodate the absent and the temporarily uninspired. Postage for a packet of letters varied from $1.50 to $2.00. Letters normally arrived on Monday and always by Tuesday.

The students were assured that no one except their teachers and their correspondents would read their letters without their permission. They were told that the authors of this study would read their letters rather carefully with an eye to conducting some research and that after school was out the letters would become the property of the authors until the following September, when all correspondence might be reclaimed. Naturally all mail was to be saved, and each student maintained a folder of his/her correspondence in the classroom. Every effort was made to assure them that short of plotting mass murder, they could write whatever and however they wished.

There was, though, one giant prohibition. Nothing but the written word was to be exchanged until the end of the project -- no pictures, audiotapes or phone calls. Exchange of home addresses was also illegal. In the last two weeks, though, pictures, a box of revealing artifacts from each school, and videotapes were exchanged. In the videotapes each student had about 30 seconds to speak his or her mind singly or in small groups. The idea was to provide a durable structure for the activity and then to turn the students loose and observe what happened.

What happened was beyond anyone's dreams. We immediately concluded that young people have an extremely high drive to communicate significantly, a drive which the normal functioning of an English class may tend to mask. In fact the curriculum for the whole semester faded into a pale background for this single, obsessively pursued activity. School office personnel who handled the mail were besieged throughout each Monday by students seeking to intercept their letters as soon as possible. Each week it got more difficult for one teacher, Mrs. Wilde, to read the letters and to note the patterns of developing relation-

ships before Wednesday because the students got more and more adept at ferreting out where she had tried to secret herself.

The assurance we gave them about the privacy of their correspondence was forgotten after the first exchange, for they could not help but share with their classmates interesting parts of their letters and interesting aspects of their correspondents' personalities. Still they did respect any earnest, private confidences offered in the letters and kept these to themselves. The fact that the letters were read, even studied by their teachers and occasionally by other students did not seem at all to inhibit their writing, most of them maintaining a very frank and revealing dialogue.

In sum, what happened was a communications explosion that provided the students a unique opportunity to write with purpose and consideration and that provided us with a mother-lode of data about adolescence and about rhetorical relationships. What follows is an overview of the types of writing in which the sixty pairs of correspondents engaged during the semester and some findings about what personal correspondence is and how the medium seems to work best. No student is quoted more than once and all names have been changed.

In the opening few exchanges there were certain topics and issues almost universally treated. The students would open the correspondence by outlining their interests and hobbies (sports, the outdoors, music), by describing the makeup of their families, and by recounting personal histories. The most demanded and most offered information in the early letters was the correspondents' course schedules. Somehow the schedules provided essential insights to the students as they tried to get to know each other. Almost all the early letters repeated apologetic, self deprecating concerns about the lack of neat-

ness, the poor "grammar" and the possibility, indeed the certainty, that the letters they were writing would be boring. Being boring was obviously the most feared and despised condition that could result from a relationship. In the majority of the first exchanges, however, the students made strong attempts to reach out to their writing partners and to seek and give assurances.

> I would like to know more about you. How many in your family? Do you have any hobbies? Do you enjoy playing any sports? If you have anything interesting to write (or maybe if it's not interesting) about -- make sure and do!!

> Your thoughts were impressive. I appreciated knowing my own feelings aren't that unusual.

> I enjoyed reading your response to my first letter, and I apologize for the shallowness of the 2nd letter.

> I think you made a good start in your first letter! You certainly did better than I did.

After the fourth or fifth letters such groping disappeared as the students' confidence in the medium grew.

As we considered the development of the correspondents' relationships, our view turned toward future inquiry into the way students' ideas and rhetorical perspectives vary during a correspondence of many weeks. Thus, we began searching for patterns useful in typifying the substance of what they wrote. Eventually we identified three dimensions of discourse, each of which is applicable to any statement in the letters and which together seem to constitute a basic three-faceted perspective on correspondence. These dimensions are subject distance, temporal distance, and depth of understanding.

They pertain in turn to the noun phrase, verb phrase and meaning of each T unit. Subject distance can be conceived as a continuum of subject matter extending from the writer ("my" thoughts, feelings, actions) to the two correspondents as a pair ("you and I"), to the correspondent ("you"), to other people and things ("she, them, it"). The four excerpts below illustrate the scope of this dimension in the form of responses to phenomena deep within the writer to phenomena increasingly remote.

> I have had a horrible day. my life is all confused.... I am having trouble setting my goals and living it up. I am the type of person who usually doesn't open up. I keep all of myself to myself. I think it is the best way even though I sometimes suffer periods of depression. I am in one of these right now.

> You write such terrific letters. I feel like I have my own private psychiatrist. You're really a beautiful person, Richard. The thing I love about you most is your sincere concern for other people. You're not hung up about yourself -- you're hung up on other people. I like that!

> An event occured to a girl I know from work this last weekend that made me cry. On the Saturday before Easter, this girl, Mary Allan was with some of her friends after she got off work. Suddenly, a person walked up to her and told her that her father had just been killed. Mary's younger brother and sister were being hospitalized. I have never seen a happy go lucky girl like her, fall though so many depths of despair as she did over the next day....Mary would not be comforted....By isolating herself, she denied those of us around her to bare her burden with her, she had to carry that weight all by herself.

> Last night I couldn't sleep and I watched clouds passing across the face of the moon for at least 45 minutes. The moon was it's usual silvery self, but the clouds were the strangest colors of hay and smoke and the background was a vivid, cornflower-blue, while the light of the moon made a rose halo -- Have you ever looked up and realized how high -- how far away the clouds are? People take the most awesome things for granted!

Obviously subject distance does not necessarily refer to how committed the writer is to the subject or how absorbed (s)he is by it. Similarly temporal distance is not necessarily concerned with the sense of immediacy felt by the writer, but it does serve to place the writer's attention in time. While this dimension is infinitely divisible, we found the correspondents concerned themselves with four major periods: the near future (speculation about what ought to be done soon and plans up to college), the present (events and attitudes present during the writing of the letter), the immediate past (during high school) and the distant past (childhood). Examples illustrating the range from past to future follow:

> As a wee tyke of 5, I was forever trying to kill myself. Here are a few of the "better" examples. There was the time I smelled the spray deoderant and then sprayed myself! (Down my throat) It smelled sooo good! And of course there was the time I fell out the window, second-story variety. Luckily my fall was broken. unfortunately the "breaker" was a rose-bush. Last but not least was the time I got hungry. (It was Christmas) No I didn't munch down on the Tree! Just the pretty glass balls.

> Things haven't been going so great at home lately. Mom & Dad weren't getting along too well and mom told me that Dad was moving out as soon as he found an apartment. I was pretty upset, but so was she so I didn't say anything. Anyway dad went to look at apartments & they were really bad so he and mom talked it over & he is staying with us. Now they are making a go of it. I always pictured mom & dad as a perfect couple, but I was wrong.

> At this moment, sleet is tapping against the windows of the classroom and occasionally a snowflake falls to the earth. We have not had a snowfall of more than 1/16 of an inch this year....Wait, it's sleeting golf balls! I can't believe this! Maybe I'll get to pull my sled out of storage after all. One of my friends just dropped his pen out the window (2 stories high) while pointing at the ice.

> Now I have a problem. I have a date with a guy named Bob, from the University, Sunday. Bill Jefferson, who knows Sam

> real well said if I tell Sam I want to break up he will just stand there and look at me. I don't know how I am going to handle this. Also Sunday the 27th I have a date with Ralph and the 2nd of April another date with Ralph ....I don't know what to do.

Like temporal distances, the levels of understanding of which statements give evidence are probably uncountable, but for the practical purpose of tracing the depth of a student's thinking we find that three levels suffice. These are analogous to Harold Herber's three levels of comprehension: literal, interpretive and applied.[1] The premise here is that a person can "read," understand and report experience on the same planes as (s)he can read and comprehend an expository text. At the most superficial level are non interpretive statements, concrete descriptions or narrations of observable fact. Many of the statements in the quotations given above are of this type. ("Sleet is tapping against the outside window." "I smelled the spray deoderant and then sprayed myself!") Even if a statement is a tall tale it may still be non interpretive if it would be possible to verify it empirically. (Eg. "There I was, treking up the side of the Himalayas.") At the profoundest level of understanding are statements of principle, generalizations, and conclusions from former experience about how things work, about how life seems to function. ("People take the most awesome things for granted!") When referring to individuals, writers operate at a profound level of understanding when they make inferences or conclusions based on the perception of enduring tendencies. ("I am the type of person who usually doesn't open up.")

Naturally any statement offering neither a generalization nor verifiable facts must operate in a broad middle interpretive level. The distinction between fact and opinion is sometimes blurred as in the use of "usual" in "The moon was it's usual silvery self." Gener-

ally sensory interpretations need not be considered to stretch the literal too far. Statements at the mid-level of understanding frequently entail judgements of events ("Things haven't been going so well at home lately"). In referring to individuals, writers operate at this interpretive level when they make inferences and judgments which are relevant to the individual only in a temporary context and which do not propose any enduring principles ("I have a problem").

Depth of understanding as we use the term may seem nebulous until one comes to understand that while discourse at a profound level of understanding sets forth propositions concluded to be of durable worth in enjoying or coping with some aspect of life, the significance or meaningfulness of such propositions is relative to the writer. The seeming triviality, the degree of validity, or the abstractness of a statement, therefore, does not necessarily bear on the depth of understanding it suggests. Below are given two excerpts which differ greatly in degree of seriousness but which both manifest relatively deep understanding.

> Trolling is fishing with the boat moving at near idle speed and the lines dragging behind....The most fun is to get about 6 guys and 2 cases of beer, fill the tanks up and go out all day to troll. It's a good idea to bring a loaf of bread (or two) and some cold cuts in a cooler, too, because sometimes you get so hungry you'd eat the fish raw! Then you set out the lines, lay back in the sun, drink beer, eat, and wait for some action. Even if you don't catch anything it doesn't really matter. The fish are just extra to the good time you'll have. After 4 or 5 hours (or until you run out of beer or food or room for the fish or toilet paper (ha ha) or the gas gets low) you cruise in and ski for a couple of hours, spraying water on old folks and just generally raise Hell.

> It's easy to become dependent on pot -- not physically addicted but emotionally hooked -- and after awhile you <u>need</u> to get high a lot. No matter how it starts if it gets out of hand at any time then that's when it gets destructive. Personalities change, priorities change, you get a lazy who-gives-a-shit attitude. Things change perspective completely. If you can handle dope and not get

> like that, then I think it's fine....
> Another reason I'm against the overuse of unnatural highs (remember I'm all in favor of controlled use) is that most people who do, the "dope freaks" or whatever, are really mindless. There's just nothing better for them to do, so they do dope. If they're really intelligent they probably won't get in too deep -- they'll know their limit. I just know so many people who sleep, eat and live drugs. It's really a waste.

Note that except for the first clause in the first passage (which is a definition, not a generalization or a principle) all other clauses in the two passages indicate the writers' considered understanding of their respective topics. The first writer proposes a set of principles concerning how to have a good time trolling and the second writer offers principles helpful in understanding and coping with marijuana. If the reader wants to deal with trolling or smoking marijuana, and if the writers have given valid generalizations, then the reader may take these generalizations into consideration and expect his/her coping with such matters to gain in efficiency.

Of course, the rhetorical dimensions identified here are by no means definitive. As yet there is no comprehensive way to categorize all the possible variables of prose discourse. For example, another dimension which has a bearing on how students interact through correspondence is that of humor. Since humor exists in the eye of the beholder, however, it is difficult to identify by degrees or types. Our students tended to favor humor of outlandish exaggeration and fantasy:

> In case you were wondering, Indonesian field hockey is a sport played between two ten man teams. The object is to shoot a croquet ball into the goalee of the other team. Either baseball bats or tennis raquets may be used in this

> endeavor. The sport had its origin in Malaysia during the German occupation of the 1930's. A slight variation of the game which is played around here, allows the offensive team to hit the ball into either end of the goalee. Of course, there is a great risk that in this variation the goalee will get upset and quit.

> I could just picture you sitting alone in a corner sobbing away while the rest of your class read their letters, because you didn't get one from me. Can you ever forgive me?!? I know it's no excuse but it just slipped my mind what with the hurricane and all. Oh don't worry any, it wasn't half as bad as the fire, and the orphanage they're sending me to is really a nice place. The fire didn't last too long because the flood put it out before it could reach the basement where my step-father kept me locked with the polar bears, and I have a real nice box of ashes to remember everyone by.

In order to conduct a rigorous investigation of how any of these variables tend to foster or hinder correspondence, the letters from a sample of the sixty pairs of correspondents would have to be statistically analyzed to reveal the extents to which specified aspects of discourse relate to one another over time. This procedure might be accomplished by codifying each T unit or each clause in the letters according to subject distance, temporal distance and level of understanding and then by computing correlations which would indicate significant positive and negative relationships. In the present study, however, we confined ourselves to a more clinical approach. Still, after eliciting reactions from students at the conclusion of the project and after examining the completed correspondence for each pair of writers, we can make certain tentative conclusions.

Specifically the students tend to prefer discourse at relatively profound levels of understanding. They believe it is more stimulating to be informed of what writers have concluded as significant than to be informed only of what writers have seen or done. It is revealing that humorous passages such as the two quoted do not manifest much depth of understanding and are not very effective at eliciting dia-

logue. More than anything, the students want to know how their correspondents feel about things. Thus the T unit subject most identifiable with the correspondent ("I, we") tends to be preferred to the more remote stances ("Them, it"). Nevertheless the students also want direct feedback about what they write, and they are pleased and tend to respond in kind when their correspondents address them directly and give their assessment of what "you" are like.

While they do treat extensively topics other than their own personalities (school, religion, abortion, drugs, dating conventions) discussion of such topics generally fails to elicit commensurate response if the subject is treated as remote from the writer. For example a student who objectively discusses the beliefs and function of his/her church is unlikely to elicit extended relevant comment in return correspondence. On the other hand, a student who generalizes about his/her own religious beliefs and attitudes in relation to a church is quite likely to receive a responding letter in the same vein. In sum, dialogue through the mail seems to be fostered less by objectified wit and observation than by the discernment and reporting of significant personalized understandings.

As suggested earlier, the time span treated in the letters is quite narrow. For the most part, attention centers on periods from a few days in the past to a few days in the future. Plans for graduation and college are popular but easily exhausted topics, and although escapades from years past can be colorful and revealing, they do not tend to elicit much response. The students want to know about themselves in the present. The motivating force to the letters, therefore, seems to be to discover what kind of person "you are" and "I am."

Most of the students were caught up in this motivating force and learned well from it. Before the project their attitude was that letter writing was a desiccated form of communication, letters being just dialogues with all the vital juices squeezed out. And it is true that some students experienced a dreary phenomenon that came to be known as the "hi-bye syndrome," characterized by the opening, "Hi. How are you? I'm fine." followed shortly by the closing, "Well, gotta go. Bye." Naturally this phenomenon militated against fruitful use of correspondence. Nevertheless, the helpless fury such letters engendered indicated the students' growing understanding that letter writing provides a special communicative opportunity not available by other means.

In short, correspondence makes it possible to develop a relationship solely through the articulation of thoughts and feelings, and for that reason the students found it liberating. They found themselves able to express thoughts and feelings without concern for the myriad complications and responsibilities that attend relationships carried on in physical proximity. So while they were denied the rich, multi-faceted interaction available to people in one another's presence, they were also exempted from the inhibitions, and they could be uniquely precise, open and bold. Our students siezed this opportunity and found a taste for writing we hope will remain with them for a long time to come.

REFERENCE

1 Herber, Harold L., Teaching Reading in Content Areas. Englewood Clifts, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.